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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001959

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SUBJECT: DIYALA: PUBLIC CELEBRATION, DISBELIEF, FEAR IN
REACTION TO ZARQAWI'S DEATH

REF: BAGHDAD 1899

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR MARGARET SCOBAY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: News of the death of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi on June 7 produced public celebration in Diyala. Among many of our contacts, however, disbelief that Zarqawi had actually been killed after so many false reports and fears of the response by Zarqawi's group within Diyala muted enthusiasm over the terrorist's death. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) At approximately 10 a.m. on June 8, news of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's death began to filter out through Diyala's well-established grapevine, prompted by the story breaking on Arab satellite television networks. The exact circumstances and location of Zarqawi's death were initially misreported as having taken place in Baghdad. When later reporting singled out the town of Hibhib, a few miles northwest of Ba'qubah, as the site of Zarqawi's death, local reactions began to change somewhat.

CELEBRATION IN SHIA TOWNS

¶3. (C) In nearby Khalis and the southeastern Diyala town of Balad Ruz, a carnival atmosphere prevailed as residents fired weapons in the air and passed out candy and baked sweets in the streets. (NOTE: Both towns contain large Shia populations.) Most contacts, Shia and Sunni alike, expressed their excitement at the death when contacted by PRT interpreters. In a June 8 meeting with CF brigade commander, the Sunni Deputy Governor of Diyala jumped out of his chair in apparent celebration when the news of Zarqawi's death appeared on the crawler at the bottom of the screen of the television in his office.

DISBELIEF MUTES CELEBRATION IN BA'QUBAH, MUQDADIYAH

¶4. (C) In other areas, however, the news produced less jubilation. In Muqdadiyah, a large delegation of almost 100 Sunni and Shia sheikhs and other notables were meeting to mediate a feud between a Sunni and a Shia tribe in the area. When one sheikh received a telephone call alerting him to Zarqawi's death, the assembled sheikhs murmured to each other for a few minutes, then returned to their discussion of the situation in Muqdadiyah. Former Diyala governor Dr. Abdullah al-Juburi, the host of the meeting, speculated that the lack of reaction stemmed from uncertainty about whether the report was accurate, noting that "this is, I think, the fifth time we have heard about this thing happening."

¶5. (C) Several other contacts, primarily Sunnis, expressed

similar doubts and several Shia seemed to be looking for reassurance that Zarqawi's death was a fact. Khalid al-Senjari, the independent Sunni mayor of Ba'qubah, noted on June 8 that the streets of Ba'qubah were quiet and said that a curfew had been declared beginning at 4 p.m. on June 8. He said that he would reserve judgment on the effects of the death of Zarqawi pending conclusive evidence that it had actually happened, and argued that the naming of the "national security" ministers that morning had been a more important event in the life of Iraq. Mahdi Saleh al-Juburi, Vice Chairman of the Diyala branch of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and Secretary-General of the Provincial Council warned that Zarqawi was "slippery."

TWO KINDS OF FEAR

¶6. (C) Sunni leaders in the Khalis area were generally defensive when contacted by PRT interpreters for their reactions to the day's news. Dr. Hussein al-Zubaidi, the IIP chairman for the northwestern Khalis District, said that nobody seemed to know who owned the house that Zarqawi had occupied; they only knew that it was a rental property. In Hibhib, the clearly nervous Sunni sheikh Khalid al-Ubaidi congratulated IPAQ on the victory against terrorism. Ubaidi then noted that the house that Zarqawi had occupied was not actually in Hibhib, but a mile outside of the town, and swore that neither he nor any of his tribe had had any knowledge of Zarqawi's presence. (NOTE: Sheikh Khalid's discomfort may have been intensified by his confident assertion in a meeting with IPAQ on June 7 that there were no terrorists in Hibhib other than Jaysh al-Mahdi raiders from outside.)

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¶7. (C) Sunni Sheikh Taha Aziz, Chairman of the Khalis District Council, had a slightly different take on the event. Guardedly noting his approval of the strike, he pointed out that a strong retaliation from Al-Qaeda was likely, and voiced his fear that his region would be the target of spectacular attacks in the upcoming days. Sheikh Dhari Tha'baan al-Asadi, the Shia Vice Chairman of the Diyala Provincial Council and leader of the recent Shia "walkout" from the Council in protest of the lack of security in the province, predicted "many dark days" in Diyala before Al-Qaeda's fury was fully expended.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The overall happiness of our contacts at Zarqawi's death seemed genuine. The difference in public reaction between those areas predominantly populated by Shias and those with more balanced or predominantly Sunni populations seems to have stemmed primarily from fear of Al-Qaeda retaliation against celebrants in the latter areas. Not a good sign, but also probably not a sign of popular sympathy for Zarqawi. The effect of disbelief in suppressing celebrations in Diyala was unlikely to abate without some kind of acknowledgment by Al-Qaeda of Zarqawi's death; after repeated disappointment, Diyala's residents are suspicious of the veracity of any good news.

KHALILZAD